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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Humanitarian Response

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. As conditions in Somalia continue to deteriorate, aid agencies are grappling with fundamental humanitarian dilemmas. Although the crisis has worsened it is not, nor will it likely become, a famine. Nevertheless, the latitude to operate in Somalia is shrinking, blurring the lines between political and humanitarian activity, and reducing the ability to respond to needs and use resources effectively. The American NGO CARE is ending its operations in South/Central Somalia following threats and kidnappings from al-Shabaab. A potential Ethiopian military pullout may cause greater volatility in the humanitarian arena, especially in Mogadishu. The October 29 suicide bombings in Hargeisa and Bossaso have affected humanitarian operations in Somaliland and Puntland. Increased difficulties in delivering aid could lead to significant out-migration. End Summary.

Shrinking Humanitarian Space
and Accountability

¶2. (SBU) Humanitarian conditions in Somalia continue to deteriorate. The United Nations estimates that nearly half of the population will require humanitarian assistance, which will cost an estimated \$900 million over the next year (ref a). The operating environment for agencies conducting humanitarian operations is more complex than ever. Agencies are grappling with the most fundamental humanitarian issues, including those of neutrality, impartiality, do no harm, and basic accountability. This cable seeks to lay out some of the current challenges, issues, and debates facing the humanitarian community in Somalia.

¶3. (SBU) The high level of general insecurity, compounded by assassinations, threats, and kidnapping of humanitarian relief workers has reduced the capacity of aid agencies to respond to on-going and new emergency needs. Many agencies have withdrawn their international staff and now have national staff or local Somali non-governmental organizations (NGOs) run their programs. However, even national staff and agencies are finding it difficult at times to access areas. Agencies freely acknowledge that many programs are being implemented via "remote control" and understand the increased risk this poses for misuse and diversion of aid. Individual agencies debate whether conditions have already deteriorated to the point that minimal levels of security and accountability have been exceeded.

Line Blurred Between
Humanitarian and
Political Actors

14. (SBU) Our partners tell us that some Somalis no longer distinguish between humanitarian and political actors. Agencies, particularly U.S.-based ones, believe they are now being targeted because of their perceived associations with certain U.S. government activities, such as the missile strikes in Dhobley and Dhusamareb in 2008. The United Nations is also vulnerable to the same charges, when distinct UN agencies, like the U.N. Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provide direct support to the political process while simultaneously responding to humanitarian needs through the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF. Discussion in political fora about humanitarian issues is also seen as controversial by some aid organizations, as it links humanitarian and political issues in a way that they believe compromises perceptions of their neutrality. Aid agencies generally advocate for a de-linking of humanitarian and political/development activities.

CARE: Targeted and Closing Out

15. (SBU) CARE has publicly maintained that its Somalia program is only suspended following the kidnapping of two CARE staff and threats from al-Shabaab (ref b). In fact, CARE is preparing to close its operation --its largest-- including shuttering offices and terminating the majority of its staff in South/Central Somalia and Nairobi. CARE had been one of the two major food aid response agencies in Somalia (along with WFP) and it implemented a wide-range of USAID-supported activities. Some of CARE's programs will move to

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Somaliland and Puntland, where CARE will maintain a presence, and CARE remains hopeful that the threat in the South and Central regions will recede, so that it can resume programming there. In the meantime, WFP has agreed to take conduct food aid distributions in CARE's former operational areas.

A No-Win Decision:
Losing Leverage
Against al-Shabaab

16. (SBU) We have expressed concern over the humanitarian community's reluctance to protest threats against CARE (as well as against the U.S.-based NGO International Medical Corps). The community's reluctance seemingly allows al-Shabaab to choose which organizations can work in a given area, regardless of the local community's opinion. CARE acknowledges that pulling out may empower al-Shabaab, but believes it has no choice. It believes it cannot hold the local community hostage and supports the continued provision of life-saving assistance by other organizations if it itself cannot operate freely. (All CARE-serviced areas are labeled humanitarian emergencies by the UN's Food Security Analysis Unit (FSAU). The consequences of stopping aid would be mass out-migration (including into Kenya) and/or increased mortality rates.)

17. (SBU) CARE has indicated that al-Shabaab may be seeking to increase its leverage by seeking to deny assistance to areas where CARE operates (all of Mudug and Hiran, as well as parts of Gedo, Middle Shabelle, and Galgaduud regions). By complying, aid agencies could be unwittingly aiding al-Shabaab. USAID has requested a thorough analysis of the dynamics in order to determine if such linkages in fact exist.

Uncertainties in Mogadishu

18. (SBU) Ongoing fighting in Mogadishu and uncertainties in the wake of the Ethiopian government's announcement that it will withdraw its troops by year's end signal greater volatility in the humanitarian arena. Humanitarian agencies are predicting a fight for Mogadishu which may leave Mogadishu port inaccessible for the

transit of humanitarian goods. USAID/OFDA is finalizing a USD 1 million contribution to WFP's special operations, which is rehabilitating the road from El Ma'an beach port (north of Mogadishu) to ensure continued humanitarian access. Work has begun and will take four to six weeks to complete. If fighting in Mogadishu intensifies, ongoing feeding programs (a daily cooked meal for 80,000 of Mogadishu's poorest) could be jeopardized, which would force more Somalis from Mogadishu. Current planning for this possible scenario, however, envisions that access will be halted for a matter of weeks rather than months into and within Mogadishu.

Hargeisa Bombing Impact

¶9. (U) The October 29 suicide bombings in Hargeisa and Bossasso have constrained humanitarian operations there. With danger increasing in the South/Central regions, many agencies had moved staff to northern Somalia and in some cases temporarily relocated entire programs to Somaliland. With the bombings, most expatriate staff in Hargeisa and Bossaso have been evacuated from Somalia and the UN has increased the security level to Phase IV in Hargeisa, which constricts the number and type of staff as well as the programming in these areas.

We Remain Flexible
in Programming:
But Abuse is
a Possibility

¶10. (U) USAID has been very flexible in Somalia. It provides no-cost extensions to programs slowed by the operating environment and allows organizations to re-locate activities to safer areas. In some cases, organizations are expanding into new sectors as activities elsewhere become constrained.

¶11. (SBU) Humanitarian actors are being subject to competing

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demands. On the one hand, there is the imperative to respond to a grave humanitarian crisis. On the other hand, the constrained operating environment means they must be prepared for the possible misuse and diversion of aid resources, especially to al-Shabaab, a USG-designated terrorist organization. USAID makes every effort to ensure that its partners exercise due diligence, in order to avoid resources flowing to al-Shabaab. We recognize, however, that the current operating environment complicates that task, and are proceeding to obtain the necessary waivers for some assistance on humanitarian grounds.

¶12. (SBU) Nowhere is this potential for abuse higher than with food aid, as it represents one the most significant resources going into the country. In the past, Somali actors have used this resource to further their political and military objectives. Thus far, significant improvements in the logistics of food aid transport and distributions reduce opportunities for diversion. Currently, USAID believes the biggest vulnerability for diversion is post-distribution, through such means as local groups "taxing" beneficiaries for a portion of their food.

Worst Case Scenario:
But Famine Unlikely

¶13. (SBU) A significant surge in fighting, leading to reduced access for our partners, could lead to greater misuse of food aid (and possibly denial of food aid by Somali groups for political or military reasons). In such a situation, it will be difficult to avoid politicizing humanitarian assistance, as continuation of aid when some of it is being diverted may feed the conflict. By the same token, stopping assistance in a given area may be perceived as favoring one party to the conflict over another, and could lead to aid staff being targeted in retaliation. Should international staff

be targeted in sufficient numbers, the entire humanitarian operation in Somalia or at least in certain regions may grind to a halt.

¶14. (U) USAID has had numerous conversations with Somalia food security analysts, including the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems (FEWS) who continue to maintain that as bad as the situation is, it is not, nor will it likely become, a famine as defined by FSAU. FSAU maintains a food security classification system (an innovative scale based on multiple criteria impacting food security which are gathered twice annually following each rainy season and updated during the year with additional information on prices, malnutrition, displacement, and other statistics) that tracks these indicators and would raise an early alarm. Further, FSAU and FEWS have a number of staff throughout Somalia monitoring nutrition, market prices, and other information in order to provide early warning of further rapid deterioration in the humanitarian situation so that a timely response may be mounted.

¶15. (U) Significant differences exist between the current situation and the famine of the early '90s, and we are likely to witness mass out-migration to Kenya before we will see mass starvation. Normally, increased mortality would be the result of disease outbreaks in populations already weakened by malnutrition. Despite the worsening situation, all indicators are still significantly below those that obtained during Somalia's last famine. High levels of remittances, increased communications such as mobile phones and the Internet, good transport options, and the continued ability of clans to travel through other clan-controlled areas are all factors which should allow populations to better cope and if necessary, to migrate out before a famine begins.

Uncertain Future

¶16. (SBU) If conditions in Somalia worsen and al-Shabaab continues to extend its reach, aid agencies may find it increasingly difficult to avoid the numerous political landmines which dot the landscape. Even in the current environment, it is difficult for them to not be seen as partisan by some Somali factions. Further complicating our partners' work are the high levels of insecurity. If more organizations close as a result of the increasingly difficult operating environment, the reduced number of providers may foster a perception that certain groups or clans are receiving preferential treatment, which could in turn lead to increased insecurity for humanitarian staff. In anticipation of such a possibility, we are having discussions with humanitarian organizations about tripwires

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that could cause them to suspend or halt their activities.

¶17. (SBU) With the closure of CARE, the largest NGO in Somalia, our capacity to respond will shrink and a steadily worsening environment means it is in real jeopardy of shrinking further. As circumstances deteriorate, each organization will have to decide what level of risk it is willing to impose on its staff and what level of accountability it is able to tolerate. USAID will continue to assist partners as they struggle with the enormous challenges posed by the humanitarian crisis in Somalia.

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